

# History of Riverton

Immigrants from Iceland began to arrive in America in the early 1870's. The first arrivals settled for the most part in the United States and in Halifax County in Nova Scotia. But in all these places the best lands had already been taken, and in order to realize their dream of an all Icelandic colony, most of these people aided by four government loans from the Dominion government, moved in 1875 to the strip of land on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg that they named New Iceland. This territory was about six miles wide, and extended north for 40 miles from Boundary Creek. This creek was so named because it was the line which marked at that time the northern boundary of Manitoba. The colony was in the district of Keewatin and the people used the expression, "going south to Manitoba."

Leader of the later groups was Sigtryggur Jonasson. He returned to Iceland during the winter of 1875 - 76 as an agent of the Canadian government to recruit colonists, with the result that the next summer around 1400 people emigrated. Of these, nearly 1200 came to New Iceland. All had reached Winnipeg shortly after the middle of August. Travelling by flatboat and small boats, they had made their way to Gimli by the end of the month. A few did not go that far but chose to settle in the southern part of the district. Some single persons and a few families remained in Winnipeg.

On arriving by boat to the Icelandic River, their first task was to measure out the land—160 acres to each family. This was done so accurately that few corrections had to be made by the government surveyors when they arrived that winter. The townsite of Lundi now Riverton was marked out half a mile deep by a quarter mile wide, three miles up from the river mouth. The old town site of Lundi is directly opposite to the Lutheran Church. There was the old wharf where Lake Winnipeg pioneer sailboats and steamboats were frequent visitors, among them Jonasson's and Fridrikson's "Victoria", Kristjon Finsson's "Sigurros", and Stefan Sigurdson's "Vikingur". Today motor boats and airplanes have taken their places and are moored at the dock, on the west bank of the river, when in town.

The Lutheran church is located on the south-east corner of "Modruvillum", the quarter-section taken by Sigtryggur Jonasson on November 1st, 1876. To the south is Grund, the home of Johann Briem, the first reeve of this district, when regular municipal government was established in 1887. Both of these lands have been divided into town lots on which the west

side of Riverton is built. The name of Lundi was changed to Icelandic River and in 1914 to Riverton.

On the river bank, to either side of the old wharf stood the homes of two pioneer merchants of the community, Kristjon Finsson and Sveinn Thorvaldson. Mr. Finsson's home carried the name "Lundi" as long as the old house stood. Just to the north of his home was a log house in which "Framfari", the first Icelandic newspaper in America, was published.

When the first settlers arrived here, the river banks were thickly treed. The river was the highway and every home had its rowboat. Great elms leaned out over the river and boaters had to be careful not to get their oars caught in their branches. Four or five Indian cabins were on the west bank at Modruvillum and Osi, one of them belonging to John Ramsay, who proved a great friend to the newcomers. His home was just north of the creek at Osi.

In October, 1876, the Dominion government granted the colony a loan of \$18,000 to buy food supplies for the winter, stoves, the most necessary household articles, tools and 40 cows. The last loan of \$25 000 was granted in April 1877 for the purpose of buying seed, implements, nets, stoves, food supplies and 250 head of cattle. These loans were to be repaid by January 1, 1889.

The River Settlement received some of its share of the loans in the fall and this proved of immeasurable help to them that first winter. There was little opportunity to obtain fish because of the distance from the lake and the lack of suitable winter shoes and warm clothing. Haying, cutting of trees for logs, the building of houses and securing them as well as possible against the cold, occupied the men during the first months.

The outbreak of the smallpox epidemic in November 1876 curtailed activities to a great degree. The first case of smallpox appeared in this part of New Iceland in a cabin located just north of where the Lutheran Church is now. This cabin was later called "Bola". Thorgrimur Jonasson says that it was thought that the infection was brought to the settlement in cloth bought in Quebec. On the 24th the first case appeared and by the end of November nineteen people had died. The total number of deaths in the whole New Iceland colony was just over one hundred. From one third to one half of the population contracted the disease.

The epidemic began to subside after the New Year. The last death of the plague occurred in March. However throat and lung complaints